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SUBJECT: LATVIAN MEDIA: TWO SEPARATE WORLDS

11. (U) SUMMARY: Latvian media exists in two parallel spheres, based on language, which media experts refer to as the "two information spaces". This media segmentation tends to reinforce existing ethnic-based differences in Latvian public opinion, and creates some challenges for Latvia's leadership. The media division is based not only on language but also on reporting styles and on content. The Russian-language media in Latvia is largely influenced by broadcast media received from Moscow. Latvian-language media more closely approximates Western reporting standards and differs noticeably from the Russian-language media that tend to be more reflective of old Soviet journalism and with no clear line between news and opinion. The press in Latvia tends to be passive and conducts little investigative journalism, although this is slowly beginning to change. Embassy press releases are often reprinted in full as the complete story. Reaching the widest possible audience in Latvia requires a media strategy that bridges the linguistic divide and that connects with multiple media outlets. Reaching a particular target audience, on the other hand, entails focus on media that appeals to that segment of the Latvian population. END SUMMARY

Print media

12. (U) To reach decision makers at the national level, the preferred sources would be mainstream quality newspapers like Latvian-language Diena, Neatkariga Rita Avize and Russian-language Telegraf. To reach the countryside audience Latvijas Avize and regional newspapers are preferred. Seniors who speak Russian prefer the "retro-communist" newspaper Vesti Sevodnya. To attract the largest numbers with a human interest story, the women's weekly magazine Ieva or the celebrity journal Privata Dzive (Private Life) are the preferred venues.

12. (U) Diena, owned by Scandinavian media giant Bonnier, is the most widely read and influential newspaper among the political and social elite in Latvia, with a circulation of 70,000, but an actual readership of an estimated 360,000. Some even refer to this centrist newspaper as a political party in its own right because its commentaries are written by the most seasoned columnists. Diena tends to be pro-U.S. on major foreign policy issues including NATO membership and Latvian involvement in Iraq, and progressive on social issues.

13. (U) The closest competitors are the daily Latvijas Avize with a circulation of 90,000 mostly in the countryside, and Neatkariga Rita Avize in urban areas, circulation 40,000. Both papers are politically and socially conservative and are owned by the oil export company Ventspils Nafta in the western Latvian city of Ventpils. Neatkariga Rita Avize tends to be staunchly nationalistic, opposed to major US and NATO foreign policy initiatives, and conservative on social issues. Latvijas Avize reports on national and local news and rarely addresses international news in any depth.

14. (U) Telegraf is the only Western-style Russian-language newspaper

in Latvia and is the sole Russian-language paper to adhere to professional standards of journalism. Since Latvia joined the EU, Telegraf has devoted more effort to explaining domestic affairs instead of parroting Moscow's perspectives. Telegraf tends to report facts and not repeat rumors as news. They are generally balanced in their reporting of US foreign policy and progressive on social issues.

¶15. (U) Glossy gossip magazines garner the highest readership and sales. The most popular publications in Latvia are both Latvian and Russian-language women's magazines or weekly human-interest type newspapers or supplements. Ieva, Santa, Ljubljū, and Subotta are just a few examples. Privata Dzīve magazine stays on top of the news, approaching issues from the angle of "personality." If your picture is not published in Privata Dzīve, your star doesn't shine in Latvia's social, political or economic life. The content divide between Latvian and Russian publications in this market niche is the smallest, though Russian glossy magazines tend to feature a lot of articles about Russian and Moscow stars.

¶16. (U) Latvia's print media landscape is diverse and includes many specialized monthly magazines aimed at various target audiences—female and male readers, teenagers, artists, music fans, architecture lovers, philosophers, television "addicts" and other groups. The "quality" news magazines, unfortunately, have not found their market niche yet.

Broadcast Media

¶17. (U) The two most popular nightly news shows are Latvian Independent Television's news, which is broadcast at 8:00 p.m. and Latvian National Television's news show "Panorama", which is broadcast at 8:30 p.m. Both are broadcast in Latvian language but are popular news sources among politically aware Russians as well. Most of the general Russian population, however, spends quite a bit of time watching channels from Moscow that are available via cable for a relatively small monthly fee. The Russian channels tend to broadcast Moscow news programs directly from Russia without any focus on Latvian news perspectives, as well as Moscow-centric programs, live entertainment shows, and old Russian films.

¶18. (U) Locally produced analytical TV programs are weak, with the exception of Janis Domburs's political talk show "Kas notiek Latvija?" (What is happening in Latvia?) on Wednesdays at 9:30 p.m. It features contentious debates among politicians and government officials on "hot" issues, akin to American Sunday talk shows.

¶19. (U) De Facto, a news program in the "60 Minutes" style investigative journalism, is broadcasted on Sunday evenings. The program generates positive discussion among those who are predisposed to support the revelations uncovered by the reporters but is dismissed as rumor mongering among the subjects of the broadcast stories. De Facto was the subject of a recent dispute between the journalists and the management of Latvian state television allegedly over the station's choice of the reporter hired to replace a journalist who is on maternity leave. The news team considered moving the program to an independent television station. For the time being at least, De Facto is still broadcast on state television with only three journalists.

¶10. (U) Latvian National Radio remains the leading source of news and information, but in Riga several private stations have managed to attract a competitive audience. Some stations, like Radio SWH, are making a real effort to develop their news departments with serious content. Private stations nonetheless still lag behind Latvian National Radio's morning news, generally listened to by people driving to work.

¶11. (U) Radio has gone the farthest in bridging the language divide that characterizes the Latvian media. In particular, Latvian National Radio 4 programming has the unofficial nickname "the integration program" because it tries systematically to inform Russian-speakers about local news and to counter Moscow news in a constructive way.

Conclusions

¶12. (U) The existence of the two parallel media spheres means that public opinion develops in parallel spheres as well, creating certain dilemmas for Latvia's leadership in communicating with the populace and implementing policies which benefit from broad support across the population. The Russian speaking, usually non-citizen and somewhat older population looks to the east for their information and forms their opinion based on what Moscow says. This is particularly important in bilateral relations concerning the treatment of ethnic Russians in Latvia. The Russian language press regularly lambastes the government over this issue, even if not all ethnic Russians consider the situation as stark as the media's portrayal. The Latvian language press, on the other hand, tends to take a more nationalistic approach and downplays claims that the human rights of ethnic Russians in Latvia are infringed upon. In general, both the Latvian and Russian press tend to reinforce the existing opinions and prejudices of their readership, rather than building bridges across what remains a substantial cultural divide.

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